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ABSTRACT

In some schools, students with disabilities achieve exemplary results. To find out what these schools do that set them apart, the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs sponsored a series of studies focused on "Beacons of Excellence Schools." This topical brief highlights results from three of these studies. The University of Maryland study identified indicators that may be used by elementary and middle school administrators to focus school improvement efforts on behalf of students with disabilities. Leadership was found to be a major variable within the Beacons of Excellence Schools. The University of Minnesota and the Council for Exceptional Children identified key characteristics of high-performing secondary schools. Features leading to success were implementation of a common vision through active leadership, stakeholder involvement, instructional innovation and professional development, high expectations for student achievement, and collaboration between general and special educators. The Education Development Center, Inc. discovered how urban middle schools combine knowledge of features that lead to excellent general education with strategies for including students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Strategies included culturally responsive teaching, investigative learning, school-wide inclusive practices, and specific instructional practices that put the schools stated philosophies into practice. (CR)

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ERIC/OSEP TOPICAL BRIEF

February 2002

To Light A Beacon: What Administrators Can Do To Make Schools Successful for All Students

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To Light a Beacon: What Administrators Can Do To Make Schools Successful for All Students

Executive Summary

In some schools, students with disabilities achieve exemplary results. To find out what these schools do that sets them apart, the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs sponsored a series of studies focused on *Beacons of Excellence Schools*. Selection of these schools was based on their records of supporting achievement for students with disabilities in the context of helping all students achieve. This ERIC/OSEP Topical Brief highlights results from three of these studies:

- The **University of Maryland** study identified indicators that may be used by elementary and middle school administrators to focus school improvement efforts on behalf of students with disabilities. The study yielded insights about the processes and features of *Beacons of Excellence Schools* and identified issues related to the availability and use of quantitative data to measure these indicators.
- The **University of Minnesota and the Council for Exceptional Children** identified key characteristics of high-performing secondary schools. Features leading to success were implementation of a common vision through active leadership, stakeholder involvement, instructional innovation and professional development, high expectations for student achievement, and collaboration between general and special educators.
- The **Education Development Center, Inc.** discovered how urban middle schools combine knowledge of features that lead to excellent general education with strategies for including students with disabilities in regular classroom settings. Strategies included culturally responsive teaching, investigative learning, school-wide inclusive practices, and specific instructional practices that put the school's stated philosophies into practice in the classroom.

These studies are described in greater detail in this topical brief.

To Light a Beacon: What Administrators Can Do To Make Schools Successful for All Students

Since the mid 1980s, our nation's schools have undergone serious reform efforts to improve academic results. Although **reform for all** students traditionally has been the rallying slogan, most reform efforts have given little consideration to students with disabilities. In fact, it was not until recent years that schools began to include students with disabilities in school- and district-wide reform efforts. This was spurred, in part, by provisions in the 1997 reauthorization of the ***Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*** (IDEA), requiring the participation of students with disabilities in challenging curriculum and State and district-wide assessment programs.

Over the course of this reform history, researchers have taught us much about the features of exemplary schools in which all students achieve to high standards. To varying degrees, we know that many students succeed in schools in which strong leaders maintain high standards, rigorous curricula, a sound instructional program, a safe environment, family involvement, and an equitable accountability system. But what about schools where *all* students—including students with disabilities—succeed? What makes those schools successful?

This topical brief presents an initial look at what researchers are learning about schools whose students with disabilities are achieving exemplary results in the context of school efforts to enhance results for all students. It focuses on illuminating **features** associated with success for students with disabilities that administrators may want to address as they set the leadership tone for their schools and implement programs.

A Look at the Research Highlighted in this Brief

What characterizes schools that support their students with disabilities in the context of efforts to achieve exemplary results for all students? As part of the Beacons of Excellence Research Initiative, the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) posed this question to three research teams at the following organizations:

- University of Maryland. Led by **Margaret McLaughlin** with **Elizabeth Caron**.

- University of Minnesota. Led by **Teri Wallace** with **Tom Bartholomay**, in collaboration with **Christine Mason**, the Council for Exceptional Children.
- Education Development Center, Inc. Led by **Catherine Cobb Morocco** with **Cindy Aguilar**, **Nancy Brigham**, and **Nancy Clark-Chiarelli**.

Each research team was charged with studying schools that had been enhancing results for all students. Researchers had two major goals:

- To identify features contributing to exemplary learning results.
- To examine how those features enhance learning results for all students, including students with disabilities.

To tackle this enormous challenge, researchers investigated *Beacons of Excellence Schools*—defined here as high performing schools that ensure that all students, including students with disabilities, achieve to high standards.

Characteristics of a *Beacons of Excellence School*

Beacons of Excellence Schools represent a community that includes its students, administrators, teachers, other employees, and parents, all of whom contribute to its students' achievements. To help all students achieve to high standards, most *Beacons of Excellence Schools* have

- Instituted a long-range vision of success for all students.
- Incorporated exemplary practices.
- Provided a climate in which all students are included and respected.
- Supported a collaborative community among staff members.
- Combined knowledge of excellent education with strategies for including students with diverse learning needs in general classroom settings.
- Made changes in policy, school organization, professional development, and classroom practice as part of larger reform efforts.

Beyond identifying *Beacons of Excellence Schools* for inquiry, each of the three studies took a different approach to the research, resulting in more focused inquiries:

- University of Maryland researchers studied how *Beacons of Excellence Schools* define exemplary results for elementary and middle school students with disabilities and identified key indicators for measuring school qualities.
- University of Minnesota and Council for Exceptional Children researchers identified and examined key features associated with high performing secondary schools.

- Educational Development Center, Inc. researchers uncovered ways that urban middle schools combine knowledge of excellent middle-grades education with strategies for including students with disabilities in regular classroom settings.

See Table 1 for an overview of the approaches taken by researchers.

The value of looking at a research question from multiple perspectives lies in the richness and comprehensiveness of information that emerges from the researchers' combined efforts. In this series of studies, each research group forged a different path in exploring educational reform, and each has illuminated practices at *Beacons of Excellence Schools* that have useful applications for other schools. As a result, researchers' combined efforts offer administrators many entry points from which to proceed in their quest to better understand how students with disabilities may participate in exemplary school programs and achieve to their potential. In other words, these research studies have shown us what it takes to light a beacon that guides students toward excellence.

The following sections present a general overview of each research group's initial findings that may be of particular interest to administrators. Each section is organized to provide

- **Background of the study.**
- **Key findings for administrators.** This includes a summary of features researchers found to be associated with schools where students with disabilities achieve exemplary results in the context of efforts to enhance achievement for all students.
- **A description of one of the key features** considered by researchers to represent a cross-cutting theme among the schools.

The researchers showed that administrators can make a difference in improving results for students with disabilities. Schools that include students with disabilities in rigorous curriculum, assessment, and accountability can and do succeed. As you read through the findings, we invite you to reflect on your own program.

Table 1: Summary of Research Approaches

University of Maryland	University of Minnesota and CEC	Education Development Center, Inc.
Focus: What indicators are associated with elementary and middle schools that have supported educational reform and high performance for all students?	***Focus***: What features characterize secondary schools that support exemplary results for students with disabilities within the context of all students achieving such results?	***Focus***: How do urban middle schools combine knowledge of excellent middle-grades education with strategies for including students with disabilities in regular classroom settings?
Schools Studied: Two schools in each of three districts in Colorado (a large, ethnically diverse urban district), Kentucky (a mid-sized rural county district), and Nebraska (a small, independent suburban district).	***Schools Studied***: Four high schools in Florida (urban), New York (urban), Tennessee (suburban), and Arizona (rural).	***Schools Studied***: Three urban, ethnically diverse middle schools in New Jersey, Missouri, and Florida.
Selection Criteria: High levels of student achievement and innovative practices in the district, nominations from district administrators, published test data, demographic diversity, innovative special education practices.	***Selection Criteria***: Evidence of exemplary learning outcomes (e.g., standardized test scores, performance measures), improvement over time (e.g., school completion, post-school indicators, daily attendance, suspension, drop-out rates), inclusion of students with disabilities (e.g., enrollment in general education courses, participation in accountability systems), adequate resource allocation, and parent and community involvement.	***Selection Criteria***: Nomination by professional associations and national leaders; self-nomination by schools; high score on selection rubric in areas of responsiveness to students, academic excellence, social equity, and inclusive practices; on-site screening.
Data Sources: Interviews with teachers and principals, student observations, and focus groups with families. Student-level data (e.g., test scores, test participation, demographics, special education data); teacher-level (e.g., experience, education, emergency certifications, staff ratios); school-level (e.g., technology); and district-level (e.g., exit and post-secondary data).	***Data Sources***: Analysis of school documents (e.g., school information disclosures, individualized education programs), opinion surveys, teacher self-reports, interview and focus group transcripts (n = approximately 250 parents, teachers, students, administrators, community and state representatives), and ecological observations in classrooms.	***Data Sources***: Analysis of surveys of students, teachers, and parents; focus groups with school and community members; shadowing students; interviews; review of student work; and student achievement data.
Results: Identification of specific, measurable indicators linked to positive outcomes for students.	***Results***: Identification of seven categories of policies/practices and descriptors; cross-school factors that characterize exemplary high schools; case studies on the leadership factor for each school; examination of classroom practices; summary of special education and general education teachers' perspectives.	***Results***: Identification of cross-case features of high-performing and inclusive school cultures; case studies of individual schools.

University of Maryland Researchers Identify Key Indicators as a Means for Examining School Success

Schools and districts need to have clearly identifiable, measurable indicators by which to gauge their progress if they wish to achieve exemplary outcomes. Indicators offer administrators a means by which to measure practices that can be linked directly to positive outcomes for students. To this end, University of Maryland researchers set out to discover which indicators were present in *Beacons of Excellence Schools* that were:

- Implementing comprehensive assessment programs (both traditional and performance assessments) for school and student accountability.
- Implementing new content and student performance standards.
- Including students with disabilities in the reforms.

"These indicators can be powerful political tools to rouse public opinion and support goals aimed at improving outcomes."

Margaret McLaughlin,
Researcher
University of Maryland

Researchers began the process by compiling a list of indicators from recognized sources (e.g., National Center on Educational Outcomes, U.S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement). Researchers and administrators in the selected districts worked from this list to identify key indicators of school and student success. This included adding indicators as appropriate, such as those specific to ensuring positive results for students with disabilities. The exhaustive list then was revised and indicators were deleted if district data were not available, if available data were not disaggregated for students with disabilities, or if data were determined to be irrelevant to program status.

The final list included indicators in the following key domains that could be expected in exemplary schools:

- Leadership.
- Collaboration.
- Curriculum and instruction.
- Decision making.
- Fiscal resources.
- Parent involvement.
- Professional community.
- Staffing.
- Professional development.
- Programs and services.

- Postsecondary education and employment.
- Student exit data.
- Citizenship and social adjustment.
- Health and physical well being.
- Satisfaction.
- School climate.
- Standards and expectations.
- Student achievement.
- Technology.

Within these construct areas, researchers collected quantitative and qualitative data on approximately 225 indicators over a three-year time span.

Key Findings for Administrators

Initial analysis of data yielded both useful and challenging results. First, many of the key constructs (e.g., professional community, school climate) did not have corresponding indicators by which school and district personnel could measure performance progress reliably. This is not to say that these constructs do not matter—rather, that issues surrounding data collection and reporting processes limited the identification of reliable indicators. Here are examples of some common problems:

- Data that were collected only at one point in time.
- Indicators that were defined differently or changed during data collection.
- Data that did not lend themselves to comparability (e.g., available at the school level or the district level but not both).

Researchers found accurate and consistent **quantitative** data that could be tracked over time in 11 areas associated with student progress. These are

- High rates of general education student participation in the state or district-wide assessment program.
- High rates of special education student participation in the state and/or district-wide assessment program.
- High general education student achievement on the state and/or district-wide assessments.
- High percentage of time spent by students with disabilities in general education classrooms.

"An indicator system points to specific measurable goals that can be used by administrators to guide school improvement for all students."

Research Team
University of Maryland

- High student attendance.
- Low student-teacher ratios.
- Experienced instructional staff.
- Well-educated instructional staff.
- Minimal number of teachers holding emergency/provisional certification.
- Low ratio of students to computers.

Researchers found that the information on these indicators was computed and reported in the same way from year to year. Moreover, in many instances, schools were already collecting data on the indicator, making the research task much easier and more reliable.

"A **Beacons of Excellence School** *can only be defined within the larger context of education reform.* **Beacons of Excellence Schools** *are achieving exemplary results for* **all** *students as they implement critical reform initiatives. Our research identified indicators that could be used to measure progress toward building capacity in other schools."*

Research Team
University of Maryland

Leadership: A Key Construct in *Beacons of Excellence Schools*

Principal leadership was found to be a major variable within the *Beacons of Excellence Schools*. In addition, school personnel also represented strong, cohesive professional communities that focused on student achievement. Three areas in which the leadership of principals and staff members played a major role in ensuring success for all students are parent-school communication, a common goal of improving student performance, and collaborative decision making.

Ensuring Parent-School Communication. In each of the *Beacons of Excellence Schools* studied, researchers noted that

- Parents believe that teachers and principals respect them and their children. They understand the value of parent involvement.
- Principals monitor and evaluate the school's efforts to get parents involved and adapt their methods to encourage involvement.
- The faculty share knowledge and information with parents.
- Principals and staff members use a variety of techniques and strategies to support parent involvement (e.g., securing district resources for collaboration efforts; engaging parents in planning curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices; and providing incentives to teachers).

Improving Student Performance. Principals and school staff members share a common goal of improving student performance. To do this they

- Use district- and school-level data to track student progress, including special education data when disaggregated at the school-level.

- Focus professional development for all general and special education faculty on improving student performance while balancing pedagogy and subject matter content.
- Encourage all general and special education faculty to collaborate with one another through a variety of methods (e.g., peer coaching, mentoring, and professional communities across and within disciplines).
- Include students with disabilities in the general education curriculum and in state and district-wide assessments.

Fostering Collaborative Decision-Making. In addition to the use of strong instructional practices, researchers note that *Beacons of Excellence Schools* are characterized by collaboration among staff and a general sense of community. Examples include:

- Principals and teachers collaborate in making key decisions.
- Principals facilitate collaboration by encouraging staff members to participate in school-wide decision making and by providing them with leadership opportunities.
- Principals and school personnel share responsibility for all students.

Principals and teachers in *Beacons of Excellence Schools* all exhibit shared leadership. However, researchers noted that the locus of leadership may shift depending on the specific issues principals were facing—principals might be strong and directive, or they might exhibit a hands-off, facilitative role in which they guided or assisted staff members as they assumed specific leadership responsibilities. Principals were more directive in schools that were implementing recently imposed state or district-wide assessment and accountability systems. In contrast, principals assumed a more facilitative role in schools in which the staff was stable and cohesive, and in which a clear focus for the curriculum was evident.

University of Minnesota Researchers, with Researchers from the Council for Exceptional Children, Uncover Success Factors in Secondary Schools

"We were interested in identifying factors that worked in our group of exemplary schools so that other schools might replicate the approaches."

Teri Wallace, Researcher
University of Minnesota

What factors contribute to success at the secondary level? Researchers at the University of Minnesota and the Council for Exceptional Children tackled this question by identifying and examining key school characteristics related to achieving learning results—specifically for students with disabilities—in *Beacons of Excellence Schools.*

To guide their inquiry, researchers began by developing a conceptual framework based on a comprehensive review of the school improvement literature. The framework included the following components:

- **Leadership**: The school-based leadership system and actions of the leaders.
- **School improvement planning**: How the school sets its directions, identifies priorities, allocates resources, acts to meet a goal, and plans to track progress.
- **Student and stakeholder focus**: The manner in which the school addresses the needs and expectations of all stakeholders.
- **Information and analysis**: The way in which a school uses data and other information to monitor and improve its performance.
- **Faculty and staff focus**: Characteristics of faculty and staff when tied to job (hard working, committed), process for hiring, compensation, staff development, expectations for job performance, design of the work environment to meet faculty needs, and faculty satisfaction.
- **Education and support processes**: School efforts to meet the needs of students (educational program, teaching methods, and support practices).
- **Performance results**: Specific data or other results used by the school to assess its performance.

Researchers investigated factors associated with each of these components. Overall, researchers found that the components **most** closely associated with success in school were faculty and staff, leadership, and education and support strategies.

Key Findings for Administrators

As part of their analysis, researchers unearthed a set of themes that exist across schools. The themes—which may be implemented differently across sites and which may be more prevalent in certain sites—should be viewed as fundamental values that represent the culture of the school. How do exemplary schools reveal these themes? They

- **Implement a common vision through active leadership**. School personnel have a sense of common mission. They feel they have the tools necessary to carry out the academic program. Administrators expect special and general education teachers to participate in educating students with disabilities.
- **Challenge all students and their teachers to achieve to high standards**. Teachers use instructional strategies that help students achieve the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn. They provide assistance to students, as well as using class time to teach study skills. Students are assessed using multiple strategies and teachers typically use assessment data to modify and adjust their teaching strategies.
- **Encourage stakeholder involvement in school leadership**. Teachers have a major role in curriculum development and the development of school policies. Students, as well as parents, have ample opportunities to participate in school activities. For example, administrators solicit ideas from all stakeholders and offer opportunities to keep everyone informed.
- **Promote innovation and professional development among staff**. Teachers—the majority of whom have higher degrees—report positive experiences with professional development activities (e.g., visiting colleagues' classrooms, participating in sessions in which the content is aligned to the school goals). Many describe their instructional style as child-centered.
- **Build an inclusive and collaborative community of learning**. Collaboration practices between general and special education teachers lead to strong student outcomes.

"Our approach was based on using validated criteria in our selection of schools to study. We began by examining criteria used in other exemplary school nominations, as well as recommendations from other research. As part of our effort, we circulated a series of outcome-referenced statements to a broad group of experts and used a consensus development process to narrow the criteria."

Research Team, University of Minnesota with the Council for Exceptional Children

Inclusion and Collaboration: Insights for Administrators

Although all of the themes are noteworthy, findings related to inclusion and collaboration have particular relevance for administrators. Researchers uncovered a number of factors in *Beacons of Excellence Schools* that have direct implications for administrators seeking to improve their programs.

Use of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) to guide instructional decisions. In *Beacons of Excellence Schools*, the principal

and teachers acknowledge the importance of the IEP in ensuring the progress of students with disabilities. For example

- The principal expects that general education teachers will participate in IEP meetings.
- General educators tend to participate in IEP meetings. Typically, they provide observations about the student's behavior, social interactions, and developmental achievements. About half of the teachers share information about the instructional strategies and learning environments that worked well for a student, areas of need and how the student's disability affected academic and nonacademic achievements, and test and performance assessment results.
- General educators know which students in their classes have IEPs, and they are well-informed about particular disabilities.
- IEPs make specific reference to modifications or accommodations to be made within the general education setting.

"Because we wanted results that would be meaningful to schools representing diverse population sectors, we intentionally chose schools in different regions of the country and schools that served a range of student populations."

Research Team, University of Minnesota with the Council for Exceptional Children

Collaboration with special educators. In *Beacons of Excellence Schools*, special and general educators work together to ensure student learning. In fact, IEPs show specific references to collaboration between general and special educators. Although very few general education teachers report in-class direct support (e.g., co-teaching, paraeducator), other examples of collaboration are evident. For example, general and special educators communicate routinely about such things as student progress, curriculum expectations, and student needs. Special educators also provide general education teachers with

- Teaching strategies.
- Advice on modifying the curriculum.
- Behavior management strategies.
- Communication strategies for students.
- Moral support.
- Student assessment strategies.

Learning programs appropriate for student needs. In *Beacons of Excellence Schools*, teachers are comfortable with the curriculum and instructional program. The program meets student needs by providing sufficient resources and supports. For example

- Technology, media, and other resources (e.g., library) are available and used.
- Teachers diversify instruction (e.g., cooperative learning groups, direct instruction, discussion, authentic activities, student-driven productions).
- Additional assistance is provided to students who need it, when they need it (e.g., in-class peer support, special education support, before or after class teacher assistance).

Administrators reinforce inclusion and collaboration by constantly sending a singular message that says all students, parents, and staff are involved in the same school, with the same expectations and opportunities. This singularity facilitates school-wide understanding of goals and expectations, while at the same time it clarifies for members their place within the school. Further, the same system that supports all students also supports students with disabilities. For example, in one of the *Beacons of Excellence Schools*, less advanced classes, often bolstered with shared teaching or smaller student-adult ratios, are available to all students who need them, regardless of exceptionalities. As a result, fragmentation between departments, programs, staff, and students is replaced with a shared community perspective.

"We cannot begin to change results for students with disabilities until we understand how schools as a whole provide access and support."

Catherine Cobb Morocco
Researcher
Education Development Center, Inc.

Education Development Center, Inc., Researchers Describe Exemplary Urban Middle Schools

Researchers at Education Development Center, Inc., have long been involved in studying exemplary middle schools. For them, *Beacons of Excellence Schools* are characterized by three dimensions set forth by the national middle grades reform movement:

- Developmental responsiveness.
- Academic excellence.
- Social equity.

The OSEP Beacons of Excellence initiative added a new dimension to their work by asking, "How do middle schools that meet the criteria set forth by the national middle grades reform movement support exemplary learning results for students with disabilities? How do students with varying kinds of disabilities experience the curriculum and daily life in these schools?"

Key Findings for Administrators

At the core of all *Beacons of Excellence School* efforts is a philosophy that all students are academically competent when they are given the tools for constructing knowledge. School personnel integrate all aspects of daily life and practice around this philosophy. An important finding is that success in *Beacons of Excellence Schools* is not due to any one particular list of "best practices." Instead, researchers found that these

schools bring together a variety of reform practices—a safe climate, challenging curricula, research-based instruction, strong family-school relationships, and strong leadership—to realize a strong, schoolwide philosophy.

Each school is unique in its way of providing access to a rigorous curriculum for all students. Schools accomplish this mission in ways that reflect the individual school's philosophy, history, and student population. Examples include:

- **Culturally responsive teaching**. In a predominantly Latino/Hispanic school with a history of using technology in instruction, inclusive school-wide practices include flexible code-switching between Spanish and English, parallel bilingual programming, and teachers serving as coaches to scaffold learning. Students provide one another with informal assistance as necessary and receive individualized assistance in and outside the classroom. Technology is extensively used in instruction with students. A school-based decision making process engages teachers, students, and parents. Parents, as well as students, are trained in technology applications and participate in conflict mediation skill training.
- **Investigative learning**. A science magnet school brings together inner-city African-American students and suburban students in a school-museum partnership in which they engage in investigative learning. Inclusive school-wide practices include grade-level teaming and curriculum design, cooperative learning in "pods," and students researching, analyzing, discussing, and writing about important scientific and social questions.
- **School-wide inclusive practices**. Students with disabilities are included in classroom learning schoolwide in a school with many migrant and recent immigrant students. Inclusive practices include interdisciplinary teams for planning, assessment, and instruction; looping of students in the same team for two years; co-teaching by special and general education teachers; and a welcome center for immigrant and migrant students. Instruction reaches all students in heterogeneous classrooms because teachers use individualized approaches based on brain research and multiple intelligences. A life skills curriculum and the availability of comprehensive social support to families provide personalized support to students.

"We tend to assume that there is one model or **best practice** *for being a high performing school. But when we unpack success in schools, we do not find one practice, but rather best practices that work well in concert in each school."*

Research Team
Education Development
Center, Inc.

Each school is unique in its approach and in its constellation of key practices, yet the schools share a set of cross-cutting features that help to explain their strong academic results and students' sense of belonging. These are:

- The philosophy of learning reflects an intellectual tradition and links reform partners beyond the school
- Collaborative structures (e.g., teaming) reflect the school's philosophy and support all students.

- Students have a specific vision of what it means to be a learner in that school.
- The school creates a village where all students are safe and feel that they belong to a learning community.
- Leaders represent the cultures and languages of the students and have expertise in inclusive practices.
- Parent and community partnerships support the school's approach to learning.
- Signature instructional practices put the school's deep beliefs into practice in the classroom.

One of the most powerful features related to classroom practice identified by researchers was *signature practices.* A signature practice is a school-wide instructional process or approach used throughout the school to foster learning. The practice reflects the important beliefs about learning in that school; by participating in the signature practice, students learn how to learn in that school. A signature practice provides a window into the inclusive culture of each school, and as such, offers administrators an entry point for examining their instructional program.

"To discover why a school was successful, we looked at multiple dimensions over time. We looked in depth at interactions in schools and classrooms, and we considered what it was like to be a student in a particular school."

Research Team
Education Development Center, Inc.

Ideas that Shape the School—Access to a Rigorous Curriculum Through Signature Practices

Signature practices translate into a daily learning philosophy that all students are academically competent when they are given the tools for constructing knowledge. The identifying features of a signature practice in the *Beacons of Excellence* middle grades school are that it reflects the school's culture and philosophy, respects the developmental needs of young adolescents, promotes equal status for all learners, and promotes academic excellence for all students. The "test" of a signature practice is whether students across the school can demonstrate it and explain it, and whether teachers use it in their everyday practice to accomplish the mission of the school.

Signature practices vary from co-teaching to using technology tools for exhibitions. Despite this variation, signature practices bundle the main features of high-performing and inclusive school culture into one skilled and pervasive practice.

"Cross Talk" is an example of a signature practice in one of the *Beacons of Excellence Schools* that researchers studied. Cross Talk is a specific discourse pattern for student discussions based on all members of the discussion listening to each student with care and attention. The teacher or a student provides a question for discussion (e.g., "What did

you learn about cultures? I pass to Nicolas.") Next, students speak one at a time, passing the turn to another student (e.g., "Thank you. I think culture is beliefs, the way you act around your family, the things you eat, and the environment you grow up in. I pass to Seth.") The pattern of interaction gives students equal status in that each voice shapes the group knowledge. Students share and process information and argue varied points of view.

Cross Talk provides students with disabilities access to rigorous cooperative investigations that form a context for learning throughout the school. Interdisciplinary units are the norm in the school, with students engaging in a rigorous investigative cycle in which they generate questions, gather data, process results, construct knowledge, and share knowledge in a schoolwide forum. Students work in cooperative pods, rotating through activities in which they integrate reading, writing, and discussion.

Students use Cross Talk in every content area. Because this talk pattern is so pervasive, students naturally fall into the Cross Talk whenever there is a whole class discussion. Through Cross Talk students develop sophistication in their participation in classroom activities by actively building content understanding with other students.

Research Helps Inform Practice

Today, many administrators are grappling with how they can make schools more successful for all students. At the forefront are questions regarding specific things administrators might do to improve results for students with disabilities within the context of success for all students. The researchers presented in this topical brief have helped shed light on features that administrators might consider when addressing this question.

To determine what lights a beacon, researchers set out to identify key features associated with success for students with disabilities. The three research teams each took a somewhat different route to discover truth. In so doing, researchers have provided administrators with three different perspectives to draw from when increasing their understanding of features associated with exemplary schools.

Although research is still emerging, preliminary results show that administrators can do much to ensure success for all students—and they do. They can consider certain features—such as those related to leadership, collaboration between special and general educators, and classroom practices—to ensure that students with disabilities achieve to high standards as part of the total school effort. While *Beacons of Excellence Schools* do not have all the answers, they have a long-range vision of success for all students and they have brought about positive change. Their work can help guide others in taking the necessary steps forward to improve results for students with disabilities in the context of all students achieving to high standards.

For More Information

Resources

To learn more about the researchers' findings, see the following resources.

Aguilar, C., and Morocco, C. (Summer 2000). Beacons of Excellence shines a light on inclusive schools that work. ***Mosaic: An EDC Report Series***. Newton, MA: Education Development Center.

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Wallace, T., Reschley Anderson, R., Bartholomay, T., and Hupp, S. (in press). An ecobehavioral examination of high school classrooms that include students with disabilities. ***Exceptional Children***.

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